

Writing for Scholars

A Practical Guide to Making Sense & Being Heard

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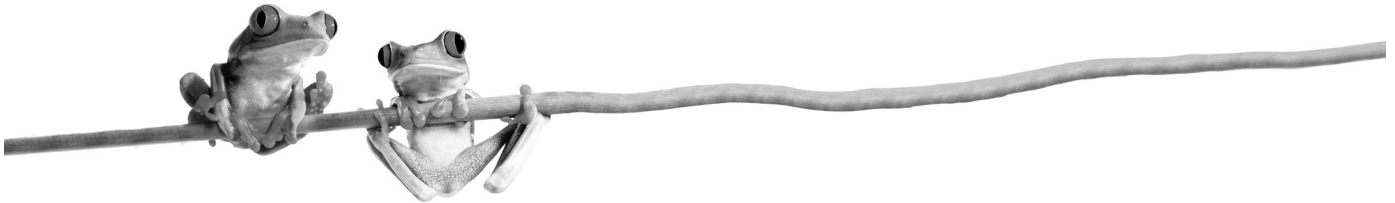
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Introduction Entering the conversation



Sometimes the only discernible difference between a genius and a lunatic is the ability to communicate. If you run up to a random crowd of people waving your arms around and shouting ‘My frogs are blue!’ you’re more likely to end up in a padded cell next to a guy who picks up alien transmissions through his fillings than on the cover of *Science*.

But if you manage to track down the right group of people (say, other frog researchers), capture their attention (‘Hey, do you remember Weinburger’s theory that pigmentation at the chromosomal level is fixed at birth in amphibians?’), be specific about exactly what you did and found (‘I exposed 50 frogs to ultraviolet light for 547 hours, after which their skin took on a distinctly bluish hue’), and explain what it means (‘This shows that Weinburger was wrong!’), you just might find yourself holding a Nobel Prize rather than a bottle of Haldol. It’s not enough simply to know something. You must be able to communicate your knowledge to others. To accomplish this, you need to know who you are talking to, what you want to say, and how you are going to say it. This is true for any discipline, for any methodological approach.

As scholars, we communicate with three main audiences: the public, user groups (such as businesses, practitioners, community organizations and government agencies) and other scholars (including aspiring scholars in the form of students)



Think of academic writing as a kind of conversation where a lot of people are talking at once. You need to have a point that the others will be interested in hearing, and to make an opening in a conversation so you can be heard.

When we communicate with the public, we usually do so through the mass media: newspapers, magazines, television programmes and radio. But while the mass media is important for getting a (simple) message across to a large number of people, most scholars find it a frustrating means of communication. Journalism is a language of black and white, and scholars are most fluent in grey. This is because most scholarship is incremental: the *ifs*, *ands* and *buts* matter. It's not just the devil that lives in the details, researchers are mighty comfortable there, too.

When we communicate with user groups, we often do so through reports (or sometimes books) written specifically for them. Perhaps a government agency wants to better understand why some young people become criminals, so they can design better crime prevention policies. Or perhaps a business wants to know if blue frogs have commercial applications. Unfortunately, reports are often largely ignored by other researchers for two main reasons. First, they seldom go through the rigorous quality control that academic books and journal articles are subjected to (see the text box 'Explaining the peer review process') and, second, they often make for excruciatingly dull reading. Writing reports gives us a false sense of freedom. Without the word limits imposed by publishers or the structural conventions of journal articles, we think we can write as much as we want and that it will get read – not least because someone cared enough about the subject matter to commission the report in the first place. Because there is a general perception in some circles that quality can be measured in bulk ('You wrote a five-kilo report? It must be good'), and we generally want to give clients their money's worth, entire forests have given their lives for reports that never have their bindings cracked.

Explaining the peer review process

Both journals and book publishers, particularly university presses, rely on peer review to ensure that your manuscript meets the standards for scholarly publishing, but their practices differ.

In *book publishing*, a two-part review process is common – that is, your work is reviewed both by the editor and by outside experts. First, the acquisitions or commissioning editor screens your proposal and a few sample chapters to evaluate whether it might be worthy of publication. Editors need relatively little time to review a proposal, but it may take them a while to get to it if they have a mountain of other ones on their desk. If an editor thinks your proposal seems promising, it may be sent out to peer reviewers – perhaps as many as ten different academics who will give their opinion on

how promising the book seems. If the reviews are positive, you may be offered a contract at this point. When the editor receives the complete manuscript, he or she will take a first pass at editing and make suggestions for revision. These suggestions can be related either to the writing or to the substance, and it may take several rounds before the editor is satisfied and ready to send it to outside experts (usually two or more, but sometimes only one) for formal review. The external review process can take from two to six months, depending on whether the manuscript is sent to the referees simultaneously or consecutively. It may take even longer if you are asked to make revisions after each review. What's important to note here is that the decision to publish primarily rests in the hands of the editor and the editorial board of the press; the role of the outside referees is advisory, and their comments are usually general.

For *journals*, peer review plays a much more decisive role. Unlike book submissions - where proposals can be sent to several presses at once, although this is increasingly frowned upon - journal articles can only be submitted to one journal at a time. Journals also expect you to send a full manuscript, not a proposal or query. Once the manuscript is received, it may be sent directly to review, but will probably go through some sort of vetting process first. Because of the high volume of submissions, the editor (or editorial board) weeds out not only articles that are clearly substandard, but also articles that may be scientifically sound but merely unsuitable for the particular journal. The percentage that gets rejected even before review varies widely, depending on the reputation of the journal and the number of submissions; some smaller (or newer) journals may reject almost none offhand, while other very highly ranked journals (particularly in the natural sciences) may reject up to 90 per cent. If the article passes the initial screening, it is usually sent to three reviewers, although there may be as many as five and sometimes (but rarely) only one or two. 'Reviewer fatigue' is a real and increasing problem, so finding suitable reviewers who agree to take on the job may take time - and this is what usually determines how long the review process will take. Three to six months is common. The reviewers make specific comments on both the content and the writing, as well as stating whether they think the article should be accepted, accepted with minor revisions, revised by the author and resubmitted, or rejected. The journal editor almost always follows the advice of the peer reviewers, but may exercise his or her own judgement in cases where the reviewers disagree with one another.

Even if we communicate regularly with the public and user groups, most of us find communicating with other scholars more important and more satisfying. It means that we are participating in the scholarly dialogue,¹ the ongoing conversation among researchers or scholars that constitutes our collective knowledge on a particular subject. Building on work from other scholars and sharing our findings to stimulate further thinking is what research and scholarship are about. But the

¹In this book, I use 'scholarly dialogue' and 'academic discourse' (as well as their variations) interchangeably.

scholarly dialogue is big and noisy, with thousands of voices chiming in. How do you make your voice heard over the din?

For most scholars, the best way to reach other scholars – and thus actively participate in the scholarly conversation – is through academic publishing, and all of the other activities associated with publishing (such as conferences or presentations). What sets academic publishing apart from other types of publishing is that it relies on peer review to ensure quality (see the text box ‘What makes scholarly writing *scholarly*?’). This means that other experts in the field have assessed the work – both as a piece of writing and as a piece of scholarship – before it was published. For some disciplines, particularly in the humanities, much scholarly publishing takes place in books (including monographs and anthologies). But for most other disciplines, the pinnacle of scholarly publishing is the journal article.

What makes scholarly writing *scholarly*?

Scholars do a lot of writing, but not all of it is scholarly. To be considered an academic publication, and thus part of the scholarly dialogue, your article, book chapter or book must satisfy these four criteria:

- **It must present new insight**
‘New’ doesn’t necessarily mean ‘revolutionary’ or ‘only minutes old’, but you must have something to add to the conversation that has not been said already – at least to the group of scholars you are talking to. In many contexts, textbooks – no matter how much expertise is needed to write them – do not count as scholarly works because they are not meant to bring new insight, but rather synthesize what is already known by most experts in the field.
- **It must both build on existing insight and be usable for future research in some way**
Like any conversation, academic discourse flows best when people listen to each other. Showing how your work builds on the work of other scholars, and presenting it in a way (for example, in the form of a claim that can be tested or at least challenged) that will allow others to build on it further (for example, by testing it), ensures that you are keeping the dialogue moving. Popular scientific works – no matter how difficult they are to write and irrespective of whether they offer new ideas – normally do not count as academic output because, being aimed at the general public, they are not intended to keep the *scholarly* dialogue moving forward.
- **It must be accessible to other scholars**
Muttering to yourself in the back of the room does not constitute participation in the discourse. This means that it doesn’t help to write something brilliant only to have it lie around in your bottom desk drawer – or even to circulate it at your workplace. In practical terms, this criterion means you need to publish in a journal or book or on a website that is recognized as an appropriate academic channel. What is considered an ‘appropriate channel’ might vary from place to place:

some institutes insist that the journal be ranked on the ISI Web of Knowledge, or have a high impact factor. And others might specifically name the target journals they want their staff to aim for. Some might emphasize the importance of open access. Check with your institute to see what kinds of publishers or publishing venues are acceptable, and what kinds are considered especially prestigious.

- **It must be subject to peer review**

What sets the scholarly dialogue apart from other conversations is the quality control offered by standardized procedures for peer review. Peer review assures the people listening to you that you have something worthwhile to say. This holds for every individual work you publish. Depending on the type of merit system used, your work might not count as scholarly – even if outside experts have offered their opinions – unless the particular journal or press is *recognized* as a scholarly publisher. And even if a journal or press is recognized as scholarly, if your specific work bypassed the peer review process, then it doesn't count: a non-reviewed letter to the editor or book review published in the *Journal of Groundbreaking Research* is not an academic publication.

Do you know what is *not* on this list? Nowhere is it written that academic output has to be boring. Careful and meticulous, yes. Devoid of any life and movement, no.

This list also contains no requirement that the work has to be in English. Although English is unquestionably the lingua franca of the academic world, academic publishing is alive and kicking in many other languages. There are good arguments for publishing in English: your voice becomes part of an international discourse, and you can bring scholarship from your country that would otherwise go unrecognized to a wider audience. However, publishing *only* in English risks eroding the academic discourse, or even popular discourse, in other languages. The choice of language inevitably informs the nature of the discourse, and keeping the discourse going in more than one language can invite more voices and increase the vibrancy of the conversation.

And whether we like it or not, our publications list is the rod by which our academic prowess is measured. Quantity matters, and so does the caliber of the journals that publish our work. More than ever, New Public Management norms in academia require us to prove our worth through publications that we can point to. And for those of us who are dependent on external sources of funding to continue doing research, our publication credentials not only help us move forward in our own careers, but they also keep our funders happy: if we can't show them that we put their money to good use, they won't give us more money to continue our work.

But to publish, we have to learn to write effectively – both for our own sakes and for the sake of our readers. The myth of the tweed-clad scholar suggests that you can lock yourself in your ivory tower, puff contentedly on your pipe and take an infinite amount of time to produce your great work; if it makes sense to you, that's all that matters. Then your readers, awed by your genius, will devote whatever time and energy is required to comprehend your every word. Reality, of course, is

somewhat different. You don't have infinite amounts of time, and neither do your readers: they are unlikely to devote even half a minute to anything they do not find compelling in some way. The world of today's academic has fewer leisurely conversations in overstuffed chairs, and more meetings, conferences, students, children and all kinds of other things to distract both you and your potential readers.

So, if you want to be heard in the scholarly dialogue – if you want your work to be read by people who share your area of interest – you need to do more than type up your results or pontificate without restraint. You need to build an argument on paper that will convince your reader from the first paragraph that what you have to say is relevant, important and valid.

The aim of this book is to help you do exactly that. By taking a closer look at what goes into writing good scholarly prose, particularly journal articles, it will show you how to make a strong, convincing, coherent and lucid argument that will reach your intended audience. This book is written mainly for researchers who are new to publishing academically, but it should also be useful for those who have been engaged in scholarly discourse for many years and are now advising young scholars, or would simply like to further hone their own skills. Even the best academic writers have works that were rejected or never satisfactorily finished, and this book can help you identify what went wrong and how to get back on track. Much of what is written here you may already know – you just may not know that you know it. It looks at the basic questions you face as a writer (such as 'Who are you talking to?' and 'What do you really want to say?'), questions so basic that often their answers are never given, merely assumed. Uprooting these assumptions will allow you to transform your tacit knowledge into knowledge that is more explicit, knowledge you can use more consciously as you write.

WHAT CONSTITUTES GOOD SCHOLARLY PROSE?

One of the first assumptions that must be uprooted before going any further is that the ability to write well is bestowed by the gods. Many believe that you either have it or you don't. If you have it, you must bow to the whims of your muse; if you don't have it, you will never learn. It's true that some people are more talented than others, much to the annoyance of those who struggle to put a simple sentence together. But even the best writers put their sentences together one word at a time. While some art is involved, mostly it's about craft. As with any craft, practice makes a huge difference. You cannot skip the practice and go right to perfect. There is a misconception among researchers that academics in the humanities have an easier time writing than others – after all, the humanities is where the words live. But a love of words and language does not guarantee an ability to write, any more than, say, a love of art enables you to paint anything grander than your garage door.

Tip

Build up a library of good writing. Collect articles and books that you think are well written. Ask yourself why you like them. How simple is the language? How complex? How concrete? Did the author use metaphors? Underline passages that strike you as particularly powerful. Re-reading some of these before you start writing can help you find a voice that is less like the articles you want to throw down, and more like the articles that you want to pick up.

And just to make this more complicated, ideals of good academic writing are not the same all over the world (see the text box ‘Different cultures of academic writing’). The Anglo-Saxon style of writing – which this book represents – puts the burden of clarity on the author: if your prose is not clear, then it is your job to go back and fix it. The more Francophone or Continental style of academic writing allows for more complexity and more digressions and puts a greater burden on the reader to interpret. The Anglo-Saxons might complain that this style is pompous, off-putting and unnecessarily convoluted, while the counter-argument is that the Anglo-Saxon style is overly simplistic, with little nuance, and does not invite the reader to actively engage. A third tradition, common, for example in Asian countries, is that the author must remain extremely respectful of his or her academic predecessors, and the best way to do this is to use their words as faithfully as possible. While the Anglo-Saxons cry ‘plagiarism’ and wring their hands over the inability of the author to assert their own voice, the authors from this tradition are shocked at our arrogance and pretentiousness. I make no claim that the Anglo-Saxon style is the ‘best’ way to write: I do, however, have to acknowledge that this style dominates in academic publishing in English, and that this book is written in accordance with this style.

Different cultures of academic writing

The norms and conventions for what constitutes good academic writing vary not only across disciplines, but also across geographical regions. What might be considered exemplary use of figurative language, description and voice in one region might be considered amateurish in another. Three of the biggest sources of variation are: formality (to what extent you are allowed to use, for example, colloquial language, the first person or contractions); the extent of *hedging* (that is, how many qualifiers the author uses to soften the claim); and *stance* (the author’s positioning relative to both the existing literature and the reader). In some cultures, you are expected to make strong claims with minimal hedging and play up your contribution to the field. In others, this would seem both ignorant and arrogant. Which of the following styles sound familiar to you?

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'A is B. I'm the only one to have ever said this, and now that I have demonstrated this beyond any doubt, the world will shift on its axis.'

'A might perhaps under some circumstances resemble B, except of course when it does not, which happens at times.'

A is B. Why do I have to keep explaining this?'



Norms of academic writing vary throughout the world

'Be patient while I elaborate in detail all my thoughts about A, and then all my thoughts about B. If you are born wealthy and have plenty of time on your hands, you can devote your life to guessing what I think the relationship between A and B might be.'

'A, being a most prestigious and well-known entity, is indubitably like B, another respected phenomenon, because this is obvious to the observant eye.'

'My professor says that A is B, which must make it true. I'm not famous enough yet to use my own words, so you have to read between the lines of the way I put together other people's words to guess what I really think.'

Although there are many variations of the Anglo-Saxon style of writing, there are key important elements they all share. Good scholarly writing in the Anglo-Saxon tradition aims to communicate an idea clearly by breaking it down into logical components and presenting these components in a way that makes sense to the reader. As scholarly writers, our biggest challenge is to explain an idea to people who have not been with us every step of the way through our research. By the time we sit down to write, most of us have been so immersed in our work for so long that we have no idea what in our work is new or difficult to grasp – everything seems obvious. Either we explain too much or we explain too little. Few of us are born knowing how to step outside ourselves and tell the story but, fortunately, most of us can learn.

And learning to write good scholarly prose starts not with mastering the parts of speech or subject–verb agreement but with understanding the nature of academic discourse. The scholarly dialogue is simply the process by which we develop a body of knowledge. For a body of knowledge to keep growing, it requires both theory and empirical evidence (both qualitative and quantitative). Theory provides the ideas that link the data together and give them meaning; and the empirical

evidence gives the theory weight. Theory alone is just an idea. Empirical data alone is just isolated experience or piles of numbers. Even disciplines that are almost completely theoretical in nature (philosophy, for example) are not just about coming up with new ideas, but also about tying these ideas to real-world phenomena (even if these phenomena are highly abstract).

Thus, knowing where your work fits into this discourse – what your contribution is and who will be interested in hearing about it – is the key. It is just like any other conversation: the participants all have their own particular interests. Those who are primarily interested in applied research will be more interested in the data; those who are primarily interested in pure research will be more interested in theory.

This applies not only to readers, but also to journal editors and book publishers. Publishers and editors are crucial: you must get published before you can reach your readers. So what do journal editors and book publishers look for when they evaluate an article or book? Let's say you are an editor of a scholarly journal. You want people to read and cite the articles published in your journal. The more your journal's articles are read and cited, the more your journal's prestige grows; the more prestigious the journal, the more scholars will read it and submit their best articles to it. People will read an article if the topic is interesting; they will cite an article if it adds something new to the discourse; and they will quote an article if it is written with precision and grace. So, first off, you will look for articles that will capture a reader's interest and that add something new. If they are well written, so much the better. Likewise, if you are a book publisher, you know that you will never be able to sell a book unless the reader finds it compelling enough to pick up in the first place. Further sales are generated if it is rich enough in content for scholars to refer to in their own scholarly inquiry. Thus relevance and quality are likely to head your list of criteria as you read the hundreds of manuscripts that land on your desk. It is also the first thing any reviewer, for either journal articles or books, will be looking for. So, as a scholarly writer, whether you are writing an article for a journal or a book for a publisher, *relevance* and *quality* are at the top of the essential checklist for scholarly writing (see the text box 'The essential checklist').

The essential checklist

- **Relevance of the topic**

To the academic discourse:

Does it push the scholarship forward?

Does it represent something new or unique?

To the journal:

Is it consistent with the journal's preferences for theme and approach?

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- **Academic quality**
 - Is the method academically sound?
 - Is the analytical framework or approach fruitful?
 - Are the data valid?
 - Is the theoretical anchoring solid?
- **Focus of the core argument**
 - Is your research question sufficiently precise and fruitful?
 - Does your thesis statement (main conclusion) answer the question, the whole question, and nothing but the question?
- **Organization and coherence**
 - Is your structure complete?
 - Does your abstract contain your aims and findings?
 - Do you adequately set the stage in your introduction?
 - Have you explained your method or approach?
 - Does your conclusion conclude and not just stop?
 - Do the sections and paragraphs have a smooth and logical flow?
- **Sentence flow**
 - Do you take the audience into account in your choice of words?
 - Are there noticeable problems with grammar or usage?
- **Headings, tables and figures**
 - Is your title engaging and suitable?
 - Do your headings correspond with the content?
 - Do your tables and figures add substance to your argument?
 - Are your tables and figures readable?
- **Format and house style**
 - Did you follow instructions to the best of your ability?
 - Are your references correct and complete?

Relevance

Does your topic add something to the academic discourse? Does it push the scholarship forward or expand the field? If it doesn't, then there is no reason for anyone to publish it. This does not mean that every article you write has to be revolutionary. The very idea of what makes something 'new' or 'innovative' varies drastically from field to field. The scholarship that makes up the body of knowledge for a given discipline or issue area is largely incremental. Sometimes being 'new' means that you look at a familiar problem with updated data to see if anything has changed.

Sometimes a step forward may require taking a step back and providing an overview if such an overview does not already exist. Sometimes ‘innovation’ means looking at an established discourse through a different theoretical lens, or introducing it to a different audience. In this sense, ‘new’ or ‘innovative’ can be very subjective, and not simply a function of fresh data on an unexplored topic resulting in a bold game-changing hypothesis. The only thing that matters is that the reader should not want to roll her eyes and say, ‘Oh, please. I have read this a thousand times before.’

Only the experts in the field can determine whether a topic is relevant, which is why peer review is so important. This is particularly true for journal articles, which are supposed to represent the cutting edge of research and scholarship. But even your expert reviewers need to be persuaded a bit, so it is up to you to make a case for the relevance of your topic. But demonstrating relevance is not always straightforward. Sometimes something can be so new that it generates scepticism, so you have to convince your reader that you are still doing rigorous scholarship. And sometimes a topic can be so familiar that you might have to work hard to show that you have something to say that hasn’t been said a hundred times before. Moreover, you need to show that the topic is relevant not only for the academic discourse, but also for the particular journal you have submitted it to. Each journal has a particular focus. One economics journal, for example, may tend toward the theoretical, another toward the empirical; one literary journal may emphasize textual analysis while another focuses on historical context. A paper may contribute to the academic discourse in general, but not be relevant for a particular journal.

Academic quality

No journal wants to publish an article that is not built on solid research or reasoning. This means that the data must be valid and the method or analysis must be sound. This is discussed further in Chapter 3. To quantitative researchers, who are used to cataloguing their data and describing their method in enough detail so that it could be reproduced by another researcher, this seems obvious, but qualitative researchers (or those who work primarily with theory) often think it does not apply to them. I assure you that it does. When it comes to documenting method and data, the main difference between qualitative and quantitative research is that qualitative researchers have a harder time explaining how they went about carrying out their research. Instead of being able simply to describe an established method (‘We used a 7-point Likert scale’) and concrete data (‘12% of men and 40% of women’), qualitative researchers, as well as scholars in the humanities, must meticulously lay out and justify their logic, in addition to linking their study to the work of others. If they don’t, their work will come across as weak, overly speculative and not founded on anything substantial. Even if the topic is fascinating or exceptionally timely, journals do not want to publish an article that lacks sound reasoning.

On the other hand, the increasing pressure for journals to increase their impact factors and the opportunities for rapid publication afforded by open access and web-based solutions mean that journals sometimes confuse ‘cutting edge’ with ‘complete balderdash’ – especially because it is not always easy to tell the difference. (You might recall the Sokal hoax in 1996, when Alan Sokal submitted an intentionally bogus article to a journal of postmodern cultural studies and it still got published – and later even defended – by the journal.) That said, it is in the best interest of neither you nor the journal to intentionally print ‘soap bubbles’ or ‘Rorschach tests’ (see the text box ‘Signs of bad academic writing’ on p.15).

For most journals, and most peer reviewers, relevance and academic quality are so important that if your work lacks them, the best writing and editing in the world will not make it publishable. Since counting on judgementally impaired editors and peer reviewers is a risky prospect, you are better off aiming for the real deal. And if your topic is relevant and your scholarship is sound, then no matter how badly written or poorly structured your manuscript, it is probably still salvageable. This means that you can work with it as a piece of writing to make it more attractive to a journal or publisher.

Here are some other criteria essential to good scholarly writing, the ones you can do something about even after your research is finished, starting with the most important.

Focus of core argument

It’s not enough to have a great topic; you need to know exactly what you want to say about it and make that clear to the reader. The core of your argument is made up of a starting point (your research question) and a destination (your thesis statement). This is explained further in Chapter 5. The research question defines the specific focus of your inquiry, and the thesis statement sums up what you want to say about it. When it comes to making an argument your reader can follow, definitiveness or correctness probably takes a back seat to actually responding to the question that was asked. Consider these two research questions: ‘Can online learning achieve the same kind of learning outcomes as classroom learning?’ and ‘How can learning developers ensure that online courses result in desired learning outcomes?’ The answer to the first might be something like ‘No, not according to my new data’, while the second might be ‘Online learning requires learning developers to conceptualize and implement innovative approaches to measuring learning outcomes, including uses of peer feedback.’ In both cases the topic is the same – online courses – but each has a different focus. The first is a ‘yes or no’ question, and the second is a ‘how’ question. What is important here is that the question and answer are related to one another. In your paper, the answer to ‘Can online learning achieve the same kind of learning outcomes as classroom

learning?’ could just as well be ‘The evidence is unclear.’ The answer, however, should not be ‘Online learning requires learning developers to conceptualize and implement innovative approaches to measuring learning outcomes, including uses of peer feedback.’ This is the answer to a slightly different question, and your readers will be confused. What your reviewers will be looking for is a well-formulated question that actually gets addressed in some way or another – even if the answer is ‘The evidence is unclear.’



What questions are you asking? What answers are you providing? A good core argument has a relevant question that you answer with evidence that supports your claim.

Organization and coherence

Once you have a starting point and an end point, you still have many choices to make about how you move from one to the other. In other words, there are a lot of different ways you can choose to organize your paper. An effective structure will help you tell the story you want to tell (this is explained in more detail in Chapter 6). The introduction presents and demonstrates the relevance of your research question, and prepares the reader for what will follow. The way you present your method or approach will convince your readers that your findings are valid and your analysis logical – and that it’s worth their while to keep reading. The results or analysis you present will provide solid evidence for your argument, and your discussion (or conclusion) allows you to lay out the logic of your thesis statement in full, as well as to discuss any implications this might have (which also increases the relevance of your inquiry). Each paragraph should flow logically to the next. Poor organization and lack of coherence will almost certainly be noted by reviewers and hurt your chances of publication.

Sentence flow

Authors who are not writing in their native language often feel they are at an unfair disadvantage when they submit manuscripts for publication. Although their papers will often (but by no means always) require more copy-editing than manuscripts written by native speakers, grammatical errors, awkward usage and sentence flow are fairly easy to fix – which is why this criterion is not at the very top of the list (and since many other books cover writing at the sentence level, it will not be discussed further in this book). If the core argument is clear and the structure is sound, any halfway decent editor can clean up the language without breaking a sweat. Moreover, scholars are often willing to put up with some seriously challenging prose if the payoff is solid scholarship. Scholarly writing is one

place where it is perhaps better to have a good argument expressed badly than a bad argument expressed well.

Headings, tables and figures

Your manuscript is likely to contain more than body text (see Chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion). At the very least, you will have a title. You will probably also have separate headings for each section. The reviewers will be looking for a title that accurately reflects the content of the entire paper and headings that reflect the content of the section that follows. Tables and figures allow you to tell your story through more than just words. Sometimes, this is simply a supplement to text, giving readers an opportunity to understand your point through more than one medium. But for quantitative researchers, the presentation of your data in the form of a table or figure might be even more important than the text you write to describe these data. For this reason, comprehensibility is the main concern: do your tables and figures help clarify your argument, or do they seem tangential or confusing?

Format and house style

Each journal or publishing house has its own set of standards for formatting and conventions with respect to spelling, punctuation, capitalization and typography. (See Chapter 10 for more on this.) These standards and conventions are often referred to collectively as the 'house style'. The goal of a house style is to achieve a certain consistency across issues of a journal or books published by a press. References are a good example: different disciplines have different conventions, and some journals want authors' names spelled out in full, others want a first initial and so on. Because formatting and style errors are by far the easiest problem for an editor to fix, they are at the bottom of the list. This does not mean that format and style do not matter, only that getting it wrong will seldom stand in the way of your getting published.

The 'Essential checklist' shows that a good core argument is more important than sentence flow, which is more important than formatting. But this is no excuse to write sloppily or put no effort into your reference list. Excellence in meeting the criteria at the bottom of the list may help make up for shortcomings closer to the top. Say your core argument is strong but your structure is wobbly. The editor could go either way: accept or reject. If your sentences are engaging and your reference list impeccable, the editor might give you the opportunity to revise your paper. If your sentences are incomprehensible and your references a mess, you probably won't get the benefit of the doubt.

Signs of bad academic writing: A typology

If good academic writing remembers that it is part of a conversation, bad academic writing forgets this in one way or another. Unfortunately, just because something has been published does not mean it is exemplary prose. Here is a typology of typical types of bad writing you might have seen in the wild, and their warning signs so you can try to avoid making the same mistake.

The Soap Bubble

The prose looks pretty but can withstand no external pressure - such as an intelligent reader. Identifiable by an overabundance of colourful figures but an almost total lack of substance. Warning sign: spending more time on layout than on content.

The Coconut

The opposite of the soap bubble, this structure seems determined to keep the reader out. Impenetrable sentences, convoluted logic and a complete lack of overview will discourage everyone but the most determined. The payoff is often worth it, but few will be hardy enough to find out. Warning sign: sentences that are a paragraph long.

The Tourist

With no clear direction, the writer wanders from one supposed point of interest to another - 'Hey, this looks interesting ... have you seen this over here? ... Ooh, this reminds me of something we saw last year.' Warning sign: writing the entire draft in one sitting, no revising.

Shock and Awe

Taking a cue from the military, the writer attempts to blind readers with facts. Designed to intimidate and confuse, this technique requires the writer to detonate bombs of empirical evidence so rapidly that the hapless reader has neither the time nor the opportunity to make sense of the data. Warning sign: more numbers or quotes than your own words.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Similar to the logic of shock and awe, but with verbosity rather than empirical evidence in the arsenal. Fearing that if the reader actually understands the words on the page she will discover the utter lack of content, the author's strategy is to assault the reader with verbiage until he cries uncle. Warning sign: multisyllabic, quasi-synonyms for otherwise comprehensible words.

The Attic

The article where nothing is thrown away and perfectly good ideas go to die a dusty and forgotten death because readers can't see them beneath all the other junk lying around. Also known as the *burrito* style of research publication (as opposed to the

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salami slicing style), because the author puts in everything he can think of with only the thinnest of excuses holding it all together. Warning sign: no deletions in your revision.

The Channel Surfer

This results from felony cut-and-paste abuse. The writer gleefully moves random sentences and paragraphs around without taking time to rewrite the transitions between the pieces. The result is no connection or flow between ideas. Warning sign: a 'second' with no 'first'.

The Inkblot

Sometimes writing is a process of discovery, and sometimes it's just a process. Here, even the writer isn't sure what the message is, so he circles around it from a variety of angles hoping one of them might make sense to someone. Like the famous Rorschach test, this strategy takes advantage of lack of clarity: There is something in it for everyone. Warning sign: a single citation from such a work can be offered as support for diametrically opposed arguments.

A NOTE ON CO-AUTHORSHIP

This book is written as if you were the sole author of every paper you write. For many of us, however, sole authorship is the exception rather than the rule. For quantitative researchers in particular, not only is co-authorship the norm, but works by single authors are viewed with scepticism.

But in the context of this book, is writing as a co-author substantially different from writing as a single author? Answering this question requires a closer look at the concept of authorship. In theory, this is obvious: the author is the person who did the research and wrote the paper. In practice, however, modern merit systems (which tend to reward quantity of publication) have led to some unfortunate developments: researchers can be listed as co-authors for such less-than-significant contributions as providing a single photograph, filling in one or two points of data or chatting with the lead author over drinks. In some fields, it is common for a doctoral supervisor to be listed as co-author (or even lead author) of manuscripts written by their students, even if they have had no direct involvement in either the research or the writing. In some areas, the extreme competition to inflate publication lists forces researchers to make deals: 'I'll add you to my list if you add me to yours.' The incentive structure is such that simply sharing an elevator with someone seems to merit a co-authorship credit; the traditional system of listing lesser contributors in an acknowledgements section is no longer seen as sufficient. Recent highly publicized incidents of data falsification, where co-authors protested that they had no knowledge of what the lead author was up to, illustrate how dangerous this development is. This is why the Vancouver rules were established (and updated in December 2013). The rules, formally known as 'The Uniform Requirements for

Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals: Writing and Editing for Biomedical Publication', are a set of ethical guidelines for conducting and reporting research. (For a complete description of the rules, see: www.icmje.org.) The requirements for authorship are as follows:

- Authorship credit should be based on: (1) substantial contributions to conception or design of the work, or the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data for the work; AND (2) drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; AND (3) final approval of the version to be published; AND (4) agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.
- All those designated as authors should meet all four criteria for authorship, and all who meet the four criteria should be identified as authors.

While the rules were designed for biomedical research, their relevance for other fields is clear. What these rules say, essentially, is that just because your name is at the bottom of the list of ten authors is no excuse for letting the others do all the work and bear all the responsibility. Moreover, simply acting as supervisor, acquiring funding or collecting some data is not enough to be listed as a co-author. Nor is commenting on and editing the manuscript. This is what the acknowledgements section is for.

While some researchers find that working with co-authors makes them work more effectively – partly because they tend to give co-authored work higher priority, and partly because they have someone to bounce ideas off of – the truth is that working with other authors can be even more challenging than doing it all yourself: you have to iron out disagreements, reach compromises and accommodate one another's writing styles and working habits. The more you work on content-driven research rather than data-driven research, the more difficult working with co-authors can be, and the harder it is for you to maintain your own voice and sense of ownership of the material. This is particularly relevant for joint authorship that involves more than one discipline. In return, the end result can be better than anything you might have managed by yourself: you have colleagues to brainstorm with and additional expertise to draw from; the risk of veering dangerously off course is minimized. The point is that multi-authored papers do not write themselves. Putting everyone's contribution in a Petri dish and turning on a heat lamp does not grow a publishable manuscript.

Thus your responsibility in a multi-author work is the same as it is when you are on your own: you participate in the research itself, you participate in the writing



Co-authoring in the social sciences often means extra work – making sure everyone agrees on a common framework – but the payoff can be both a higher quality product and the satisfaction of working as a team.

Source: Photo by Ilan Kelman

and you participate in the preparation of the manuscript for submission. Whether you are the sole author, the lead author or the fifteenth co-author, this book is designed to guide you through the process of shaping your ideas and research into a valuable contribution to the scientific dialogue.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Many books on scholarly publishing focus on what you can do when you *finish* writing – how to fiddle with your sentences, straighten out your margins, get your manuscript ready for submission and so on. Taking its point of departure from the ‘Essential checklist’, this book is designed to be useful much earlier, when you are struggling with such questions as: ‘How do I get my thoughts together?’ ‘How do I get what’s in my head onto the paper?’ and ‘How do I make it comprehensible to other people?’

Chapter 2, *Getting started: Developing good writing habits*, talks about how you can get the most out of the writing process by approaching writing as a way to discover and develop your ideas. You don’t have to have your article totally worked out in your head before you set pen to paper.

Chapter 3, *The ‘I’ in (social) science: Objectivity, transparency and argument*, introduces a central idea of the book: that academic writing is argumentative and not merely descriptive. This idea is developed more fully in Chapters 4–6.

Chapter 4, *Who are you talking to? Defining your audience*, helps you develop a sensitivity to who you are writing for and what they need from you. Chapter 5, *What do you want to say? Forming your core argument*, explains what a research question and thesis statement are, the relationship between them and their importance to your paper. Chapter 6, *How are you going to say it? Developing your structure*, describes the central elements of structure and how you can use them to build a convincing argument.

Chapter 7, *Breaking up the grey mass: Headings, figures and tables*, points out that your article consists of more than just body text and discusses how you can use headings (including your title), tables and figures to make your argument more clear, and also underscore your structure.

Chapters 8 and 9 address an often overlooked point: that actively participating in the scholarly dialogue requires more than simply publishing journal articles and books. Chapter 8, *Holding up the mirror: Giving and receiving feedback*, looks at how you can get the most out of the review process, both as a reviewer of others’ work and as the one whose work is being reviewed. Chapter 9, *Saying it out loud: Presenting your paper*, discusses how you can make your presentations more effective, and how you can use them to develop your ideas and help you in the writing process.

Chapter 10, *Delivering the goods: Following author guidelines and submitting your manuscript*, gives you advice on the kinds of details you should really focus on before submitting (or resubmitting) your work.

This book is rooted in my years of experience as an academic editor and workshop facilitator. Throughout, I present practical exercises that can be used either in a classroom setting or for self-study. The chapters can be read in sequence from beginning to end, but you can also read them in any order depending on your interests and needs. This second edition also draws from some of my own research on writing and research productivity.

Remember

Social science is an ongoing conversation that takes place mainly through peer-reviewed books and journals.

Understanding how the scholarly dialogue works will help you make sense to, and be heard by, those you want to reach.

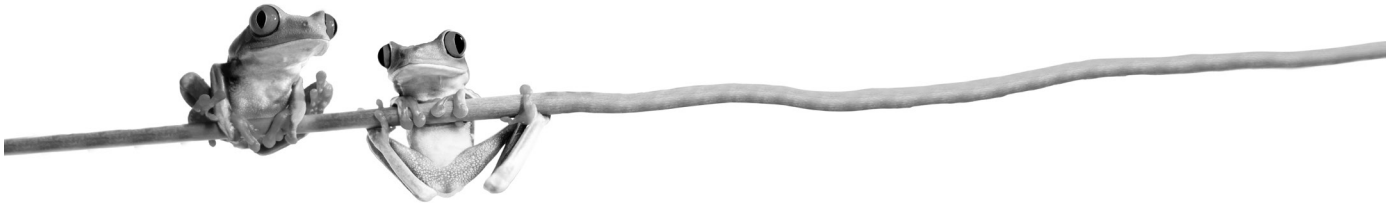
FURTHER READING

- Becker, Howard S. (2008) *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*, 2nd revd edn, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 2, 'Persona and authority', addresses many of the myths of the academic voice and persona, and essentially what academic writing is supposed to be about. Chapter 3 attacks the notion of the 'one right way'.
- Germano, William (2008) *Getting it Published: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious about Serious Books*, 2nd edn, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. A more straightforward how-to book, it covers the entire process of book publishing, from proposal, to dealing with feedback and publication.
- McKay, Sandra Lee (2003) 'Reflections on being a gatekeeper', in Christine Pearson Casanave and Stephanie Vandrick (eds), *Writing for Scholarly Publication: Behind the Scenes in Language Education*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 109-23. This chapter gives a good discussion about the peer review process.
- Murray, Rowena (2013) *Writing for Academic Journals*, 3rd edn, Maidenhead: Open University Press. Murray provides a good all-round introduction to writing journal articles, including a good discussion about why to do it in the first place and what might be stopping you.
- Sword, Helen (2012) *Stylish Academic Writing*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. With a focus on developing voice and telling the story, this book has a refreshing take on the norms of academic writing. Sword builds on her own research and analyzes style conventions from several different disciplines. She also includes exercises to help liven up your prose.



TWO

Getting started Developing good writing habits



It's not without reason that the writing process is often compared to being pregnant. Both start off with such promise, but before long, we start wondering what we have gotten ourselves into. We suffer through frustration, boredom, bouts of nausea and hours that feel like weeks. Looming up ahead is a deadline that feels both too distant and too soon. When the result is finally delivered, it's a miracle – and we cannot possibly imagine doing it again any time soon.

But we do. As scholars and researchers, we communicate our ideas primarily through writing, so most of us are working on several writing projects at once. When one is completed, there's no time or spare energy to hand around the cigars because another one is calling. Yet to most of us the writing process still feels foreign, mysterious and maybe a little scary. As students, we procrastinated till just before a paper was due, then brought on the caffeine and pulled a couple of all-nighters. As researchers, we don't seem to do much better: we get funding for, say, a year-long project. We spend eleven months researching, three weeks writing and one week revising and then, only then, do we finally discover what we want to say. By the time we've rewritten the entire paper and finished all the revisions, we are six months behind; not only have we spent all the money budgeted for that project, but we're also rapidly running out of the money budgeted for the next. We feel like failures; we swear that *next time* it will be different. But it won't – not unless we make some changes in the way we tackle this essential part of a researcher's work.